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AUTHOR Amy, Lori E.
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ABSTRACT

The literature of the contact zone has done an excellent job of elucidating the ethical demands of the classroom as a hybrid space of variously raced, classed, and gendered subjects discursively engaging across multiple identity boundaries. But a chief concern of one writing teacher is whether and how writing teachers can revise the symbol systems mobilizing the attitudes, beliefs, and actions that structure cultural violence. She wants to extend the discussions of language and identity to ask how teachers might move beyond the classroom space and bring their students' work with refiguring the symbol systems mobilizing cultural violence into the public sphere. However, taking up the challenge to structure the writing classroom as a space that might refigure the symbol systems mobilizing violence is no small task. This paper argues for the transformative potential of critical writing and/or the writing classroom as a space of sustained reflection and critical interrogation of and writing about cultural master narratives. According to the paper, M. Bracher's and H. Nelson's theories of language and identity inform the teacher's classroom practice and structure a successful writing project she assigns her students: an analysis of a cultural master narrative and its effects on cultural groups. The paper details how the course functions and discusses some of the student projects. (Contains 13 references and 4 notes.) (NKA)

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Traumatic Histories, Transforming Futures: Students Writing for the Public Sphere

By Lori E. Amy

Paper presented at the Annual Conference on College Composition and Communication (53rd, Chicago, IL, March 20-23, 2002)

L E. Amy

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Traumatic Histories, Transforming Futures: Students Writing for the Public Sphere

One evening, after a full day of panels at the 2002 Associated Writing Programs Conference in New Orleans, I was sipping coffee and nibbling on beignets at the Cafe du Monde, thinking about how we can approach the teaching of writing as a way to keep people from killing each other. My thinking was interrupted by the physical revolt of my body-- a gang of rats was scampering about the sidewalk, looking for dinner in the trash cans, coming perilously close to my legs. One of the attendants noticed my obvious disgust, and reassured me that these creatures are the squirrels of the French Quarter. And indeed, what, other than a fuzzy tail, makes one of these rodents "cute" and the other a fear-inducing threat? I cite this example to make a concrete point about the operation on us of the symbol systems through which we interpret the world: they have a physiological effect on us, and that physiological effect can make us behave towards essentially similar things (like rats and squirrels) in radically different ways. Whereas I wanted to run from the rats (and others might want to kill them), I (and many others) routinely pause to admire squirrels.

This French Quarter vignette highlights for me one of the central concerns of my teaching: how can we re-vise the symbol systems mobilizing those attitudes, beliefs, and actions that structure cultural violence? As Mark Bracher argues in *Lacan, Discourse, and Social Change*, "what happens to our sense of being or identity is determined to a large degree by what happens to those signifiers that represent us – our master signifiers—particularly the alliances they form with and the wars they wage on other signifiers" (25). Our students' sense of being in a classroom, then, will be dramatically affected by the ways in which we articulate and negotiate the competing significations of the classroom – significations of bodies, of oral and written texts, of space and arrangement, of technology. The literature of the contact zone has already done an excellent job of elucidating the ethical demands of the classroom as a hybrid space of variously raced, classed, and

gendered subjects discursively engaging across multiple identity boundaries.' But, given the radical rise in nationalistic identity narratives in post 9-11 America, I want to extend our discussions of language and identity to ask how we might move beyond the classroom space and bring our students' work with refiguring the symbol systems mobilizing cultural violence into the public sphere. As teachers and scholars of reading, English, and communication, we are especially called to this task: language plays a crucial role in "forming the foundational, structural identifications that constitute the basis of our identities" (Bracher 22), and any real change in subjectivity and behavior requires a shift in the symbolic register of our identifications.

Taking up the challenge to structure the writing classroom as a space that might refigure the symbol systems mobilizing violence is no small task. And the task grows even larger when we consider that to "shift the symbolic register" requires that we open the classroom space to students' narratives - the real stories of their real bodies in their real worlds. Because our discipline is still divided over whether or not it is appropriate to allow students' personal narratives in our writing classrooms, it can feel especially risky to encourage students' writing about personal narratives as a way to shift their identifications (and the thinking, feeling, and action in the world predicated on these identifications). Nevertheless, I believe that the events of September 11th have altered our cultural imaginary to such an extent that we can no longer afford to ignore the narratives our students bring with them to the classroom. The attacks on the United States Pentagon and the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center mark the end of America's peculiarly sheltered existence—an existence in which we could be blithely ignorant of the catastrophic violences shaking the post-national world. The brief moment of grief and mourning that followed these attacks (a moment in which we might have grown wiser as a people and more just as a nation and a global partner) was quickly subsumed to the narrative of "war" and "terror" that permeates the national and international scene and is a pervasive part of our classrooms.

Clearly, I am invested in teaching as a way to work against the identity narratives that violently pit signifying groups against each other. But group significations cohere only through the participation of individuals, and individuals' participation is frequently predicated upon their formative experiences of structural and symbolic violence.[ii] It is a truism that any fundamental shift in the collective imaginary proceeds through the individual, and it follows from this that classrooms committed to working against cultural violence must engage students in a critical interrogation of and writing through their identity narratives (narratives inevitably imbricated in structural and symbolic violences). But many teachers and scholars in our field have resisted working with students' identity narratives, especially when students bring to our classrooms histories of intense pain and deep trauma. As a profession, we have been wary of collapsing the public/private divide and uncomfortable with painful personal revelations. Understandably, students' revelations of personal/emotional pain often move us either to want to help/heal them[iii] or to erect so many boundaries between teachers and students that we prevent students from making personal disclosures.

While I trace a line of solidarity with those who have advocated for the healing potential of writing about personal experiences of painful or traumatic events[iv], I am not proposing a model of a writing classroom as a cathartic or "healing" space. Instead, I am arguing for the transformative potential of critical writing and for the writing classroom as a space of sustained reflection and critical interrogation of and writing about our cultural master narratives. Traumatic histories often evolve from and perpetuate narratives of self and world that severely limit agency, and I see a relationship between the potential violence of identity narratives constructed around an opposition to and hatred of "Others" and the truncated agency of identity narratives evolved out of traumatic experience: both severely limit individuals' possibilities for engaging in extended and meaningful relation to others and to the larger world.

I do not equate "to transform" with "to heal," nor do I argue that writing—especially in the context of a mandatory writing class – can be anybody's cure for anything. But I do insist that our critical interrogation of language as a signifying system can destabilize closed and violent signifying systems and open up ways for us to imagine alternative narratives through which to organize ourselves and our worlds. For Bracher, we transform the logic of signifying systems by chaining master signifiers-- by, for example, identifying points of intersection between competing signifiers and thus destabilizing closed signifying systems so that symbolic shifts are possible. For Hilde Lindemann Nelson, we do this by imagining counter-narratives, i.e., by telling our stories about ourselves, each other, and our worlds in new ways. Bracher and Nelson's theories of language and identity inform my classroom practice and structure one of the most consistently successful writing projects I assign: an analysis of a cultural master narrative and its effects on cultural groups. For this project, students identify a cultural narrative to research and re-think. While I do not choose the master narratives they analyze, I do provide an analytic frame from which to write. I ask students to:

1. Historicize the narrative-- find out something about how the narrative evolved, for which cultural groups the narrative is binding, the variations of the narrative between cultural sub-groups, and the different effects of the narrative on different cultural groups.
2. Analyze the us/them constructions underwriting the narrative.
3. Define their relation to the narrative and explore the different relations in which related others might stand to that narrative.
4. Explore the ways in which the narrative is both created by and co-creates the realities they live.

Within this frame, students can research and write about whatever they want. And they've been doing some amazing things. One young woman, in the course of her research,

realized that a cultural narrative to define her specific relation to her stepfather does not yet exist. As the introduction for her project, she wrote:

> Our culture has not yet found a language for my story. I can't define what happened to me as rape. I have not been forced to have sexual intercourse with my stepfather. I also can't define it as sexual assault. Even though there have been many sexual advances toward me there hasn't been an actual threat or physical force. Not having a language for this element of my identity causes very different mixed emotions. I have felt at times that I was overreacting, making something out of nothing. Not having a way to communicate my story makes the feeling of loneliness grow deeper and deeper. I haven't been able to find a language for my story. This is research that is in progress. (R.P., E-mail)

It is this kind of writing – writing that reveals the personal traumas that our culture disavows—that produces so much anxiety for so many teachers. But this is also the writing that realizes the lack in language, the violence to self and other of dominant cultural narratives that both fail to make sense of lived experience and, by virtue of non-recognition and disavowal, are complicit in violent social structures. It is thus precisely this kind of writing that allows for individuals to shift their identifications, and it is from these individual shifts that larger cultural shifts may follow.

There are many teachers of writing who will accept that writing about traumatic experiences can be transformative but who nevertheless object that the writing classroom is not the place for such writing. Two of the most prominent objections are that we cannot grade emotionally charged writing and that writing teachers are not therapists and are not qualified to deal with the emotional fallout from such painful personal disclosures. These objections seem to operate from at least three problematic premises:

1) That we do not see the writing until students turn it in;
2) That the writing is "done" once it is turned in;

3) That the students are either so attached to what they have already written or so emotionally disturbed by the writing that they do not want to critically reflect on or revise the writing.

Before exploring the transformative potential of writing like this, I want to address these objections. In the first place, before students begin researching and writing, they have to submit a project proposal that defines their topic, their interest in it, what they so far know about it, and their research method. At every stage of the writing process, from the initial project proposal through the annotated bibliography and each of the early drafts, I ask students to explain points in more detail, to find data and statistics, to consider alternative narrative perspectives, to re-think, re-vise, and re-organize sections of their text. By the time students have final drafts ready for a lower order concerns critique, I ask them to evaluate their writing using the holistic scoring scale for our state's mandated writing competency test. So, before I ever evaluate a project for its final grade, students have received oral and written feedback on the proposal, drafts, and research progress, and they have applied to their own work the evaluative criteria that we establish early in the semester. Indeed, the majority of the students can quite accurately assess the grade their project will receive and hence are not at all disturbed by my formal evaluation.

No matter how ready students might be to write about their traumatic histories, many teachers are not ready to read about them. The objection that teachers are not therapists and are not equipped to deal with the emotions students inevitably confront when they write about traumatic events speaks more to our fear of this emotion than to the students; they carry the emotion of their experience with them every day, in class and out, and when we refuse to hear it we are not protecting them from emotional upheaval, we are protecting ourselves. Protecting ourselves is necessary, and I certainly would not advise anybody who prefers not to address emotionally charged writing to encourage it. But for those of us who can hear the truth of our students' experiences and negotiate the emotional

pain these experiences can entail, this kind of personal writing can be radically transformative for both individuals and cultures.

At one level, as theorists of narrative and trauma have already argued, writing like this can mark a breaking of silence that is empowering to students.[v] But as significant for my purposes, a critical interrogation of the identity narratives structuring the relations through which traumatic events unfold may lead students to important insights about the structural violences underwriting our social relations. The young woman who wrote about her stepfather, for example, defines her work as research in-progress and understands the writing to extend beyond the boundaries of the classroom and this specific course. During her research, she was able to make a quite sophisticated distinction between the language of the public and private spheres: in a draft conference, she said that she might be able to define her stepfather's behavior as sexual harassment, but that sexual harassment laws seemed to apply only to the workplace and specifically to relations of unequal power in the workplace. Nothing like a sexual harassment law exists for the domestic space. Though only in her first year of college when she wrote this project, she has already made an important realization about the gap between her lived experience, the cultural narratives available for her to explain her experience, and the identifications -- of her mother, her stepfather, of men and women in relation—that situate specific individuals in exploitative relations to one another. With this realization, she can potentially understand the narratives and identifications of gender and family structuring her experience in a way that allows her to refigure her own identifications – as daughter, as victim, as shamed and shameful —and to forge different narratives through which to be in relation to friends, to family, to coworkers, and to her patients (she has defined nursing as her major). The semester after writing this project for my class, I received this note from R:

> ... I just wanted to thank you. Through the semester I went through a lot of things. I know that I am just at the start of the process of getting this in the past. . . . Thank you Ms. Amy for listening to me. No one has ever just listened. . . . You

have made an enormous impact on my life and I don't know how to thank you enough. I know I can get through this. I also know it will be hard.

As important as R's individual personal experience of her research and writing is the proliferating effect that her evolving understandings of self and world can have on her relations to others and in the world. It is this relation of individual to others and world with which I am most concerned; above and beyond all else, I want the work of our writing classroom to prepare students to be active participants in a civic democracy. Ronald N. Jacobs, drawing on Benhabib's argument that "the substantive goal of the public sphere" is to cultivate "ongoing public and moral conversations" and to institutionalize "these types of practices as a way of life," argues for the need to evolve civil society by introducing into the public sphere "new perspectives through new narrative creation" (20, 21). *Is* it possible for us to imagine alternative identity narratives for ourselves, alternative master narratives for our culture? As the final component of their analysis of cultural master narratives projects, students address this point: if they could tell the identity stories they have lived, researched, and analyzed differently, how would they tell them and what would this mean? And how, besides in their lived relations with others, will they bring the counter-narratives they can imagine into the public sphere?

One of the ways we practice for participation in the public sphere is by conceiving the final projects as web sites and publishing them on the world wide web. From the proposal stage onwards, I ask students to think about other groups to whom their projects would be important – who would benefit from reading their work, and what benefit would it have? As they are researching, I also ask them to think in terms of key words: what search words would somebody looking for research about what they are writing about use? While I do not require students to publish their work, I do require that they write a hypertext project, with links and images; I can read this project off of their discs if they choose not to publish it. The vast majority of students, however, do choose to publish their projects (in general, one or two students in each class might choose not to publish a project), and I read and

grade the projects from their web sites. Not all of them are stunning and not all of them are profound – a good many are the run-of-the-mill freshman writing exercises we are used to in first-year mandatory writing courses. But they are ***all*** conceived as and written for participation in the public sphere. And *that's* something.

Many of my students take the opportunity their projects present to think about -- and, if things go really well, work some things out about-- pressing issues in their own lives. Each semester, from every class, a few young women write about cultural master narratives of body and, through this writing, explore their own relation to body image and eating disorders. A handful of men each semester do the same with steroids. Each semester, at least one student writes about narratives of sexuality (most frequently in the context of defining his or her struggle through heterosexist narratives and shifting identifications to GLBTQ narratives). Since I have been asking students to write about identity narratives, I've collected a wide array of student projects exploring narratives of body/illness, gender and sexuality, race, family, domestic violence— projects that allow students to research the experiences they are living with, to see how others have thought about these experiences, to think deeply themselves about what these experiences have meant to them in the past and what new meanings they might create for themselves in their futures.

Over the years, we all try different kinds of writing with our students, frame our projects in different ways, coordinate writing assignments with our research and writing projects. Indeed, I began this analysis of cultural master narratives projects as a small-scale experiment in having students write about language, identity, and power; two years ago, I did not imagine that students' responses to this project would grow it into a major final project option analyzing cultural master narratives and imagining counter-narratives for our lives and worlds. But, after seeing what students *do* with these projects, I cannot imagine *not* using them; their writing connects the personal and the public, the citizen and the state, and, in the course of grappling with their own histories and imagining their own futures, they simultaneously grapple with our collective history and imagine our collective

future – futures that they (and we) must make up out of histories that include painful experiences such as endometriosis, diabetes, cancer, living with mentally and physically handicapped family members, gambling addictions, inter-racial and cross-cultural relationships, childhood sexual abuse, domestic violence, rape, divorce, alcoholism, death. Most significantly, this writing is not just for themselves: it is public discourse, and frequently leads students to purposeful action in the world. Through work on their projects, many of my students have started E-mail lists, launched campus organizations, joined support groups, and made changes, small and large, in their lives.

Walking students through the research, writing, and web publication of projects such as these can be intense and overwhelming. In the last weeks of the semester, with file transfer protocol problems and drafts that still need lower order concerns editing, with students in and out of my office looking for one more resource, figuring out how to save images and link them to their web pages, I can ask myself why I keep doing this. But, when the semester is over and I'm reading the projects, I remember why I take up this work: the results *can be* amazing. Sometimes, students lives can change profoundly and dramatically. As did Chris Giraurdeu's. Chris took the first sequence of her freshman writing requirement with me in the Fall of; after two weeks of conferences in which she said she could think of nothing to write about, she finally decided to research and write about what it means to be adopted. In the course of her work for my class, she joined online groups for adopted children, made contact through the Internet with searchers who find birth parents, and thoroughly researched the laws governing access to adoption records. On December 31st of that year, at 8;52 p.m., I received this message from Chris:

> Hi Dr. Amy. This is Chris from engl 1101. I just wanted to tell you that I found my birthmom. She lives in California. I'm so happy.
>
> Chris. (E-mail)

The story does not end there. Chris's birthmother was reluctant to engage with her, and, as is often the case, finding her birthmother was not a happy-ever-after experience. The next semester, Chris took the second sequence of her freshman writing requirement with me and researched and wrote about the complications of reuniting with birth parents. Over the next year, Chris stayed in touch and kept me apprised of how her relationship with her birthmother was building. She suspected that "something bad" must have happened to her mother, as her mother, who was only fourteen when she gave birth to Chris, would not reveal the name of her father. Finally, her birth mother agreed to meet Chris over Spring Break 2002; just after the break I received this E-mail:

> Hi Dr. Amy,
>
> Well, I had a very good visit with my bmom. She told me everything including who my father is. It turns out that we have the same father. I guess that makes her my sister also. Her and my adopted mom talked a lot. I met my grandmother and one of my uncles. We'll have to talk after spring break. I'll tell you all about it.
>
> Chris. (E-mail)

Chris did come and talk, and there is a great deal more to her story than I can write here. But I do not have to write it—Chris is. She continues to maintain the web site she began for my class, and eventually the parts of her story that I do not tell here will enter the public arena. Her work is online at http://www2.gasou.edu/student/gsi31813/, where she proudly features a photo of her birth mother and step brothers. Chris has been and continues to be a precious gift of a student, one of the reasons that I keep teaching and keep asking students to seriously and critically research and write about the identity narratives organizing our lives and cultures. There are so many others, too – the young men and women who pour themselves into their writing, who rise to the challenge of imagining identities and worlds beyond the traumatic histories they write out of.

In his formulation of a discourse ethics for our present age of global nationalistic violence, Martin Matuštík challenges us to positively harness an attitude of personal crisis as

a performative mode of identity (126). Personal crisis as a performative mode allows us to engage in the ongoing always-becoming development of subjects, in a relation of dialogical reciprocity between complex subject positions that defy either/or entrenchments. This, I think, is what Chris's writing achieves, and her achievement remains my inspiration and motivation to engage in the work of writing with my students.

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[i] See Mary Louise Pratt's Imperial Eyes: *Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Karen Fitts and Alan W. France, *Left Margins: Cultural Studies and Composition Pedagogy* and Janice M. Woolf, Ed., *Professing in the Contact Zone Bringing Theory and Practice Together*.

[ii] As Carolyn Nordstrom and JoAnn Martin argue in their analysis of domination, resistance, and terror, "violence is not a socioculturally fragmented phenomenon that occurs 'outside' the arena of everyday life . . . . It is part and parcel of life" (13). Blatant and obviously recognizable acts of violence – beating, torture, war, rape – evolve out of the invisible and culturally normative violences that are part of the cultural matrix forming all of our lives – poverty, racism, sexism, all of the myriad inequalities that structure our social hierarchies.

[iii] Recent work emphasizing the therapeutic effects of writing include Mark Bracher's 1999 *The Writing Cure: Psychoanalysis, Composition, and the Aims of Education* and the work of the Assembly of Expanded Perspectives on Learning; the AEPL's Summer 2002 Conference, organized by Charles M. Anderson and Marian Maccurdy, focalizes Writing and Healing: Toward Wholeness of Mind, Body, and Spirit.

[iv] See especially Stephen J. Lepore and Joshua M. Smyth, *The Writing Cure: How Expressive Writing Promotes Emotional Health and Well-Being*, Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2002.and the growing corpus of work by James Pennebaker.